

FINAL REPORT

PHASE I

OAKLAND HILLS FIRE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

March, 1992

**A Joint Project of the
Oakland Museum, Cultural Arts, & Public Libraries**

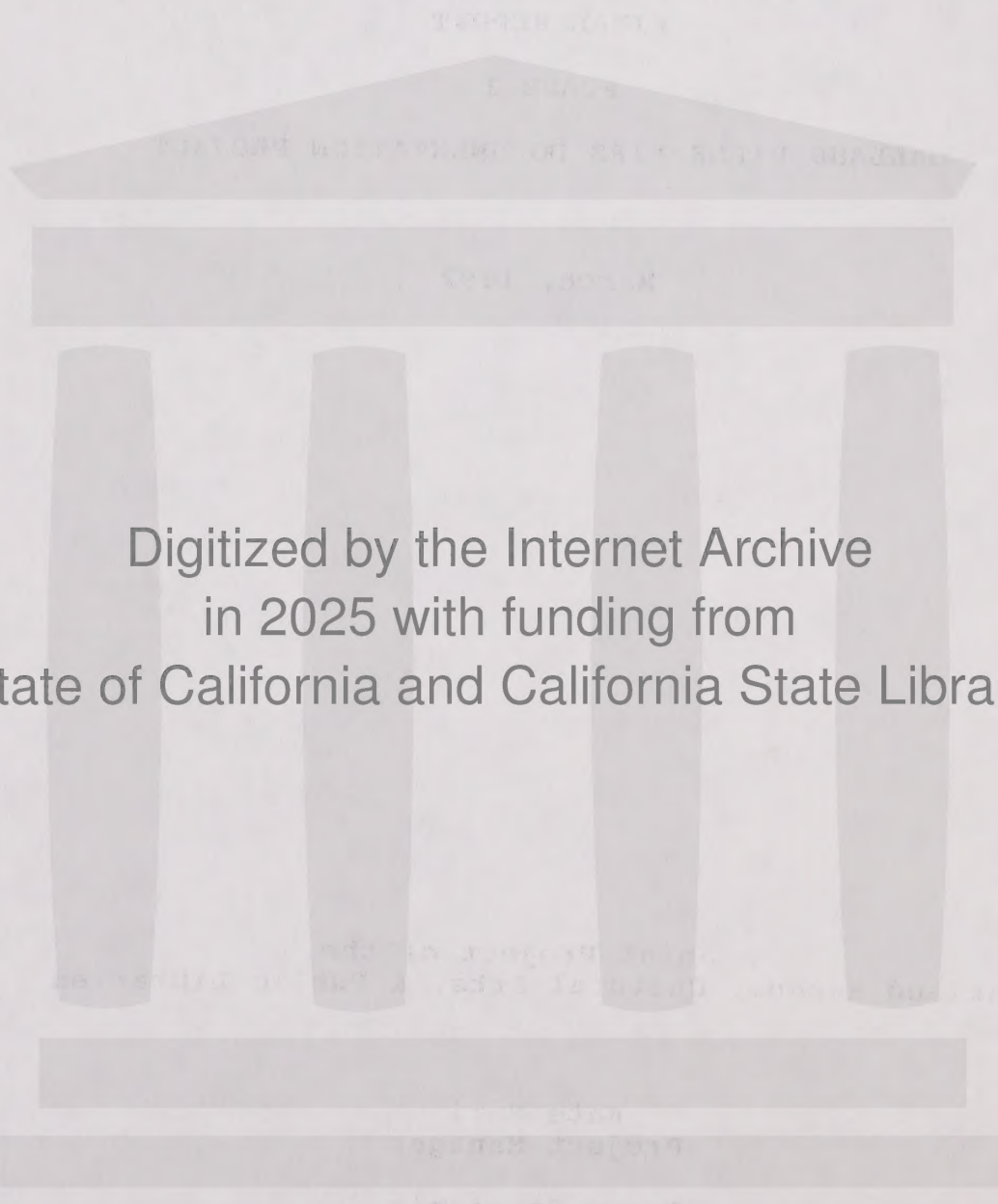
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I. INTRODUCTION

The firestorm that devastated the Oakland-Berkeley Hills on October 20, 1991, deeply affected not just a beautiful community and its many occupants, but also the entire Bay Area and uncountable numbers of people who have abiding links with this place. It is not only a major natural disaster that bears recording, but also a very human story of profound loss, heroism, courage and determination.

The tragic loss of twenty-five lives and over three thousand homes also signaled the end of a group of neighborhoods with a significant cultural heritage. It underlined the need for increased understanding of the dangers posed by the urban/wildland interface and put into motion an extensive public and private recovery effort that will continue to affect the East Bay over many years. The fire will become one of the most studied disasters in US history, and a record of its origins, its course and its aftermath one of compelling human interest and historic importance.

As with the destruction, the major part of the emergency response and the recovery and rebuilding effort have fallen to Oakland. Oakland's fire department led the fire fight and co-ordinated the mutual aid response, and Oakland city government set up the one-stop Community Recovery and Development Center within hours of the disaster to start helping survivors. Almost every department in Oakland city government is involved in co-ordinating the recovery, from clean-up in the aftermath of the fire through the years it will take to re-establish homes, services, neighborhoods and the natural environment.

In the private sector, the disaster has brought forth an enormous response. Relief organizations, community and religious centers, counseling services, and advocacy groups have been created or have

dedicated major parts of their services to fire survivors. Neighborhood "phoenix" groups have organized to represent property owners' concerns with government, insurance companies, home design and reconstruction, and a variety of other issues. Businesses have responded with an array of offered services, from design workshops to discounts on merchandise. Finally, many survivors have attempted to come to terms with their experience through expressions in art, writing, photography, dance, memorial events and the creation of memorial sites, and publications dedicated to reporting and presenting these responses.

The study of the fire has extended well beyond Oakland and its routine after-action and special task force reports. Diverse agencies of regional, state and federal government have initiated investigations into various aspects of the fire, as have academic institutions, most notably the University of California with a multi-disciplinary project, and private researchers. Local historical institutions have solicited narrative and photographic records of the fire from eyewitnesses and survivors, and are creating collections based on these documents.

As representatives of the cultural arm of the city of Oakland, the Oakland Museum, Oakland Public Libraries, and Cultural Arts Division are in a unique position to collect, preserve and present the most complete record of the hills fire. This documentation project seeks to create a comprehensive collection of visual records, documents, and artifacts that will present the history of the hills area, the events of the emergency itself, and the continuing aftermath. It is intended to serve as the public memory of the fire, as a resource for public education and the exchange of ideas and information, and as a means of honoring and commemorating the loss suffered by so many people.

II. RESEARCH TASK

The first phase of the documentation project has been to discover records that present the fire according to the three areas of interest mentioned above, that is, the history of the hills area before the fire, the fire itself, and the aftermath and recovery period. Following identification of these sources, a data base was created listing each type of record, what agency and individual controlled access to it, and a brief indication of its contents and relevance. A printed copy of that data base accompanies this report as **Appendix C**.

A consequence of this research was that we were able to discern significant interest in this project among nearly all respondents. Fire fighters and those living in or near the burned area were heartened by the thought that a permanent record of their experience would be collected and housed in a public place; researchers were interested in the possibility of accessing one collection for purposes of studying any aspect of the fire; and historians and librarians were actively supportive of the project as one of relevance and usefulness to the history of the Bay Area. As the network of contacts grew, academics, historians, researchers and private individuals expressed their support and offered their assistance.

III. RESULTS

How different institutions and individuals responded to the fire, and the form their responses took vis-a-vis documentation, reflect several general areas of interest. The following briefly summarizes the contents of the data base (**Appendix C**) in terms of these areas and what types of record were discovered in each.

A. History

To establish a picture of the hills area before the fire, contact was made with universities, libraries, special collections, historical societies, city government archives, and experts in local history. Our efforts focused on discovering sources for the man-made environment, including development, construction characteristics, architecture, landscaping, zoning, and features of the communities.

Interviews with local historians led to the discovery of relevant history books, census reports, and city council meeting minutes. Research at the Bancroft Library, Oakland History Room, and Berkeley Public Library uncovered newspaper clipping files on various aspects of local history, personal accounts of other historic disasters, and a variety of historic photographs. Historical societies in Berkeley and Oakland contain surveys and photographs of historic and/or architecturally significant buildings in the burned area, as well as maps. Records from real estate developers include photographs of many burned houses plus some of the history of development in the hills, and architectural societies have blueprints of homes, some of which were destroyed in earlier fires.

B. Natural Sciences

Records relating to the natural environment before the fire, including native and non-native vegetation, geology, topology, weather conditions, and water resources, were located in a variety of sources. Contact was made with the Forestry Department at U.C. Berkeley for general information on the area; geologists at the East Bay Regional Parks District for soil surveys, topographical maps, and erosion and slope stability studies; meteorologists at California State University, San Francisco for weather patterns (becoming known as The Diablo winds) most associated with fire in the hills area; and botanists at the Oakland Museum Natural Sciences Department for their slide library of vegetation.

C. Environment

Research into environmental records reveals that fire has always been a natural factor in the hills area, combining with its topology, vegetation, wind factors, and aridity to ensure the continued recurrence of fires in the urban/wildland interface. Human factors such as crowding, narrow roads, combustible building materials, and insufficient water supply also play a significant part.

Documents supporting these facts were located among the following agencies: Photographs and manuscripts about fires that have occurred in the area were found at the Bancroft Library on the U.C. Berkeley campus, and a collection about the Berkeley Hills Fire of September 1923 was located at the Berkeley Public Library. The U.C. Berkeley Forestry Department has timber industry records regarding rebuilding after that fire, and the East Bay Regional Parks District has produced a chronology of fire in the hills from 1923 to the present.

The Wildland Fire Research Lab within the U.C. Berkeley Forestry Department is in process of studying the October 1991 fire, as are a number of private agencies. The results of the U.C. Berkeley study should be of interest to this project, as it is a far-reaching multidisciplinary investigation. The Alameda County Flood Control District has a record of precipitation over the past 100 years, the East Bay Municipal Utilities District has published a history of water resources development in the hills area, and the U.S. Forestry Service has land-use and prevention planning reports.

D. Government

Research into civic responses to the fire began with Oakland city government, where records of the emergency and rebuilding process are centralized. The City Manager's office files all reports related to the rebuilding and recovery effort, including those of the Mayors' joint task force committees on emergency preparedness

and their final report. Other sources include the Office of Emergency Services (OES), which has a variety of reports and plans in response to the fire; the Office of Corporate Information Services (OCIS), which is developing data bases on fire victims and property; the Community Restoration and Development Center (CRDC), the city's main interface with fire survivors; and the Oakland Public Library's television station, KTOP, which has video coverage of city council meetings related to the fire and interviews with fire survivors at the CRDC and after.

Many other city departments are involved in the aftermath of the fire, including Public Works (clean-up), Public Information (emergency tapes, releases about the course of the emergency, newspaper clippings) the Parks and Recreation Department (vegetation management), and City Council¹ (ordinances, public policy implications, etc.).

Fire departments in Oakland, Berkeley, and outlying areas have all produced after-action reports detailing their part in the emergency, and the State OES, Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA), State Fire Marshall's Office and governor's office, among others, are pursuing investigations at the state level.

E. Socio-cultural Aspects

Research into this aspect of the fire dealt with the responses of individuals, news media, community and advocacy groups, religious organizations, schools, and relief organizations; and the development and presentation of records and events related to remembrance, renewal and recovery.

Many organized efforts were discovered to bring survivors together for purposes of grief and trauma counseling; help in dealing with

¹. The Oakland City Council has retained a Private Industry Council (PIC) intern to collect and classify city files related to the fire.

insurance, mortgage, housing, financial aid, and IRS difficulties; building neighborhood groups to empower them in dealing with city bureaucracy; and creating responses to their experience through the arts. Subjects of particular human interest also were found, such as the role of volunteers in fighting the fire, rescues of individuals and pets, losses of life and property, eyewitness accounts, displacement of workers, etc.

Records of these activities include publications describing services, and follow-up studies and reports by individual agencies; minutes and newsletters from neighborhood organizations; children's and adult's drawings, written and oral narratives, collaborative works, poems, paintings and sculpture, photographs, and personal relics retrieved from the fire; and videos and interviews with fire fighters, survivors, and other eyewitnesses.

Not all such records are available for inclusion in a public collection, due partly to the one-of-a-kind nature of their creation, as in the case of some of the art work, and partly to the confidential nature of some of the studies and follow-up reports, such as those dealing with financial assistance or therapy. However, many individuals have already shared their personal stories on videotape and in written form through solicitation by this project, by the Oakland History Room at the Oakland Public Library, by the Berkeley Historical Society, by the Phoenix Journal (a publication by and for fire survivors), and others.

In terms of the news media, several centralized sources for complete documentation were located, primary among them being the Public Information Office of the City of Oakland, which subscribes to a news clipping service. That office has complete clippings on the fire and the aftermath, with continuing coverage, in the form of large-format xerox collections divided by publication. Similarly, centralized sources for video coverage were discovered in the form of private businesses who provide video clipping

services and are capable of supplying over two hundred hours of video coverage of the fire and aftermath. However, many private and broadcast videos have also been located and determined to be available to this collection through donation or duplication.

By contrast, records of public and private commemorative events are not easily assembled, except inasmuch as they may have been recorded in the media. When we have become aware of them, we have included them in the data base as a record of their occurrence, even though no precise records - photographs, video, flyers, announcements, press releases - have been located as yet. Similarly, artists who are also fire survivors are listed for their potential contribution to exhibitions related to the fire, although no precise determination of available work has yet been made in most cases.

IV. TYPES OF RECORD

Records from the five areas of general interest reviewed above fall into the following three categories:

- o **visual**, including videotape, photographs, maps, drawings, three-dimensional models, artifacts, and art works;
- o **written**, including computer and paper files, media accounts, eyewitness narratives, interviews, historical and research papers, investigative studies and government reports; and
- o **auditory**, including emergency tapes, radio broadcasts, and interviews.

In some cases original records are available, as in the case of personal narratives, art and artifacts, photographic prints, books, and the like. In other cases, copies and duplicates of reports or other documents, video and audio tapes would be the only means of access to records. The options for storing records of this type and having them available for the public are discussed in **Appendix A** of this report. In a third case, computer disks may be duplicated and stored for on-line access.

V. DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLLECTION

A. Creation of an Advisory Committee

The design of the permanent collection and any public exhibitions created from it will require the participation of advisors from among the humanities, natural sciences, and environmental studies. These will include Oakland Museum curators from the history and natural sciences departments, Oakland Public Library personnel with expertise in local history, archival collections and video technology, and professors from among local university departments who are active either in studying the fire or in collecting and maintaining local history archives. Additional humanities advisors will be sought for their input in terms of sociological concerns and cultural responses. **Appendix B** of this report is a preliminary list of prospective participants. It is anticipated that this list will expand as design of the collection becomes more focused.

Working with project staff, advisors will evaluate the data base to more clearly define the parameters of the potential collection, as well as make decisions about which records should be included and which omitted. These decisions will be based in part on the philosophy of collections that each advisor will contribute from his or her area of expertise.

B. Evaluation and Acquisition

The data base is intended to act as a guide to the sources of records about the fire. Acquisition will involve returning to these sources for first-hand examination of records and personal interviews. It is anticipated that the data base will continue to grow and undergo revisions as this phase of the project proceeds.

C. Costs

The anticipated costs associated with designing, acquiring and presenting the collection include the following:

1. Honoraria for the advisory committee
2. Project Manager and research staff salaries
3. Acquisition and/or duplication of maps, videotape, photographs, books, etc.
4. Scanning of selected documents
5. Indexing
6. Video and audio equipment at user sites
7. Exhibition design and installation
8. Public events and publicity

VI. ASPECTS OF PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

Because the collection will be shared by the library and the museum, consideration must be given to the different capabilities and opportunities offered by each. In brief, the library is best suited to the permanent, archival-type storage of the bulk of records, the videotapes, and many of the photographs, drawings and narratives, while the museum is the venue for exhibitions created from elements of the collection. Some documents, photographs and artifacts may be permanently housed in the museum's history collection. Both the library and the museum are suited to public programs related to the collection, such as lectures and educational events.

A. Permanent Library Access

Because of the anticipated size of the collection, it has been proposed by William Sturm, Director of the Oakland History Room at the library, that a representative sample of records be made easily accessible to library users, with the remainder of the collection stored elsewhere, possibly at a branch library in the fire zone. It is Mr. Sturm's experience that roughly 95% of users wish to see only approximately 5% of his BART archives; this implies that it is not necessary to have the entire collection easily accessible at all times. Thus the collection should be carefully designed so as to be divisible between normal-user and specialized-research access.

All records in the collection will need to be referenced using standard library indexing techniques. Video and audio tape stations may eventually be required both at the smaller and larger storage sites, depending on decisions about video storage and access (see **Appendix A**). Also, consideration must be given to storage and display of photographs and relics.

B. Museum Exhibition

It is anticipated that the culmination of the collection process will be an exhibition in the museum that will explore the fire from an interdisciplinary viewpoint. This would include an exhibition in the history gallery of visualizations of the fire, including photographs, videotapes, eyewitness narratives, artifacts, etc., along with an exploration of the historic development of the hills; and a parallel presentation in the natural sciences gallery exploring the five-year drought, geology, topology and water resources, and weather conditions, all of which contribute to the pattern of fire in the hills. These would be supplemented by the lectures and other educational programs that the museum develops for each of its exhibitions to promote the exchange of ideas and increase public participation and awareness.

APPENDIX A

VIDEO STORAGE AND DOCUMENT SCANNING

In designing a permanent collection that would include the magnitude of documents and videotapes being generated about the fire, it is useful to consider in what form they will be stored. The following treats documents on paper and videotaped records separately.

Video Storage

A. Quality

Many video sources have been found, from individual eyewitnesses and homeowners, a variety of television stations, agencies doing continuous fire research, video clipping services that tape off of television sets, documentary film makers, and more. These sources are so diverse that the videos may come to us from sources several generations removed from the original video. Picture quality in video degenerates markedly with every generation. Thus it is important to attempt to trace the original source of any video and obtain a first-generation copy when possible.

Similarly, many videos have been taped on non-professional machines and the video is VHS quality. According to Connie Gordon, Director of KTOP-TV at the Oakland Public Library, only videos made with broadcast-quality 1-inch tape are considered suitable as masters from which copies can be made with minimum loss of quality. Obtaining copies directly from television stations and other professionals is the best way to ensure maximum quality. Obviously, in the case of amateur VHS tapes this is not possible; however, as stated above, returning to the original source will ensure the best quality possible.

B. Indexing

The Oakland Public Library's KTOP-TV station records all city council meetings and commission meetings on super VHS (3/4"). These tapes are stored permanently in the library. Those portions devoted to fire discussions could be located by means of an indexing procedure that marks edit points on the tape and inserts a "window dub" with a time code, from which an editor can then create an index. This is a time-consuming and therefore expensive procedure that is not routinely performed with these tapes. There will probably be over two years of council meetings in which fire-related issues will be discussed, or approximately 50 tapes. Section C below poses a possible alternative to indexing these tapes.

C. Storage and Use

It has been suggested by Connie Gordon that all videos pertaining to the fire be centrally stored at the Oakland Public Library's KTOP storage site, and made accessible to the public for viewing at a video station within the library. (Tapes from television stations and some other sources are not available to check out due to copyright restrictions.) Records of their use can be tracked for several years and then used to determine whether it is worthwhile to maintain them at an accessible site, to proceed with indexing the city council and commission meetings, and/or to "bump up" tapes to 1-inch masters for further duplication.

Video technology continues to be refined and digital compression techniques will also be more developed after several years. It may then be possible to store all videotapes in a significantly more compact way.

Document Scanning

While some documents should and must be maintained in their original paper form, some should be considered for conversion to a computer format. There are several groups of documents that pose a

considerable storage problem due to their size, most notably the collection of news clippings from around the country that have been xeroxed on large-format paper and are currently housed in the city's Public Information office, and the records of the City Manager's Office and City Council. If it is decided to preserve these documents in their entirety, a decision must be made about committing budget to scan them into a computer and maintain them on-line for users.

The City of Oakland's Office of Corporate Information Services (OCIS) has the capability and technology to scan documents for digital storage. Jerry Barnes, Manager, OCIS Information Management Division, has offered to give this project his assistance in the form of system design, technician training and advice on front-end user design. However, OCIS cannot commit person-hours to scanning documents, and this project will have to hire personnel to do it.

APPENDIX B

PROSPECTIVE PROJECT ADVISORS

Following is a list of individuals identified during research as potential advisors to the design of the collection. They were chosen from among academic fields where study of the fire is active, general humanities disciplines, and/or institutions already dedicated to and well qualified in archival collecting, storage and display.

Some of these individuals were interviewed and others are names referred by other sources. Only Mr. Orsi has been approached about being a project advisor.

1. Richard Orsi, History Professor, Cal State Hayward, and Editor of California History, the quarterly journal of the California Historical Society. Mr. Orsi is an expert in California water history. He has tentatively agreed to be an advisor to the project.

2. Mel Scott, Historian and Author, The San Francisco Bay Area: A Regional Historical Perspective. According to Mr. Orsi, an expert in urban planning history.

3. Charles Wollenberg, History Professor, Vista College. An expert in local history.

4. William Sturm, Director, Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library. Mr. Sturm has created and maintains an archival record of BART, and has also collected personal narratives about both the 1989 earthquake and 1991 fire.

5. Robert Bellah, Sociology Professor, UC Berkeley. According to Stan Yogi of the California Council for the Humanities, Mr. Bellah specializes in the study of the individual and community.

6. Stephen Tobriner, Architecture Professor, UC Berkeley. He teaches a course in architectural responses to disaster.

7. Robert Martin, Forestry Professor, UC Berkeley, and Director, Wildland Fire Safety Research Lab, UC Berkeley. Mr. Martin is at the center of the UC Berkeley multidisciplinary study of the fire.

8. Robert Solari, U.S. Forest Service, Fire Suppression. Mr. Solari offered his technical expertise in fire suppression issues.

9. William Roberts, UC Archivist, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.
10. Germaine LaBerge, Regional Oral History Office (ROHO), Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.
11. John Frantz, Director, Museum of the City of San Francisco. The museum is currently exhibiting a collection of documents and artifacts from the 1906 fire and earthquake.
12. Larry Dinnean, Director, Pictorial Acquisitions, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.
13. Thomas Frye, Chief Curator, History, Oakland Museum.
14. Constance Gordon, Director, KTOP-TV, Oakland Public Library. Ms. Gordon has conducted video interviews of fire survivors and is expert in video technologies.

APPENDX C

DATA BASE

OAKLAND HILLS FIRE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

March, 1992

(Separate Cover)

A Joint Project of the
Oakland Museum, Cultural Arts, & Public Libraries

Compiled by
Kate Neri
Project Manager

and

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(Natural Sciences, Environmental, and History sections)



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APPENDIX C

DATA BASE

WATLAND RILLS FISH REGENERATION PROJECT

March, 1992

(Separate Copy)

a joint project of the
Oakland Museum, Cultural Arts, a Public Library

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